

Euripides and the power of persuasion

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The ancient Athenians knew the value of a good speech but they also had a healthy suspicion of persuasive speakers. The speeches in Greek tragedy reflect these values. If we bear this in mind we have found a promising way of reading Euripides' *Medea* and assessing its value as historical evidence.

Mass media

In a modern democracy it is often assumed that to own the media is to have great power. It is not hard to see why: if you control a newspaper or a TV station you are in a position not only to filter what is said by politicians but also to affect the way it is presented to the electorate. Rupert Murdoch, an Australian-born US citizen residing in Los Angeles, is thought to hold undue influence over the British electorate. Silvio Berlusconi (the Prime Minister of Italy) arguably owes his position to his controlling stake in his country's three biggest private TV stations.

In ancient Athenian democracy the mass medium of the day was not TV, radio, or newspapers; it was public rhetoric. An Athenian *rhetor* (skilled public speaker) could reach up to 6,000 of his fellow citizens – live – with one speech. He could also be booed, heckled, and ridiculed – again live – but that was the risk that he took every time he got to his feet.

But there is an important difference with the role of mass media in a modern democracy. In modern times the steady drip of media coverage can influence the electorate over a period of months or years until eventually public opinion is converted into the will of the people at a general election. In ancient Athens the people were asked to vote on an almost weekly basis on proposals presented by *rhetoires* in the assembly. The best or most authoritative speakers generally won the day. Quite simply, political power lay in the ability to persuade.

The Athenians were simultaneously fascinated with and horrified by the power of this mass medium – just as, perhaps, we are simultaneously fascinated with and horrified by the rich and famous in modern society. A *rhetor* called Cleon in 427 B.C. is said to have criticized his audience for

being 'the best at being deceived by novelty in a speech ... yielding to the ear's pleasures, and more like men who sit to watch rhetoricians than men who sit to take counsel about the city' (part of his speech as recorded by Thucydides).

Tragic persuasion

In Greek tragedy people are trying to persuade each other of things, or to do things, much of the time. One should not underestimate the power of tragedy as a spectacle: fabulous costumes, song and dance, and at the end more often than not a dead body for everyone to see. But the powerful drama to a great extent is rooted in powerful language. Plato describes tragedy as 'a kind of rhetoric addressed to such an audience of citizens as is composed of children together with women and men, both slave and free'.

As a tragic poet, Euripides (c. 480–06) knew how to write a persuasive speech. He appears to have gained a reputation as a purveyor of dodgy rhetoric. In one comic play the ghost of Aeschylus refers to Euripides as 'that wicked man, that speaker of lies and irreverence' (from the end of Aristophanes' *Frogs*). Compare the portrayal of Euripides in two other comedies by Aristophanes: *Acharnians* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*). But the real Euripides appears to have been all too aware of the power – and danger – inherent in persuasive language. His play *Hippolytus*, for example, is full of talk about the consequences of careless talk. Here the Nurse is speaking to Phaedra:

*Speak low, child! You must not
scatter your words
So loud and recklessly! There are
people here!
Your speech careers wildly on
wheels of madness.*

One character in Euripides who is

extremely good at persuading people is Medea. Her favourite technique is to present herself as the person other people want her to be, and to tell them what they want to hear, while all the time manipulating them to her own benefit. The central scenes of Euripides' *Medea* (first performed in 431 B.C.) are a series of encounters between Medea and powerful men. In almost every case she gets what she wants. She persuades Creon (King of Corinth) that he is a reasonable man with whom she has no personal quarrel; he therefore delays her exile – fatally – for one day. She tells Aegeus (King of Athens) that he will have children; he provides her with asylum at Athens once she has done her dreadful work in Corinth. She persuades Jason that she will be reasonable and accept his remarriage to Creon's daughter; he then allows his and Medea's sons to convey deadly gifts to the princess. In only one of these central scenes – an earlier debate with Jason (lines 446–626) – does she angrily say what she wants to say instead of what other people want to hear.

Just like a woman

In the light of her skill at role-playing and persuasive talk, let us now consider one of the most famous speeches in the play. In her first scene on stage Medea is talking to the chorus of Corinthian women and says (in Philip Vellacott's translation):

*Surely, of all creatures that have
life and will, we women
Are the most wretched. When, for
an extravagant sum,
We have bought a husband, we
must then accept him as
Possessor of our body. This is to
aggravate
Wrong with worse wrong. Then the
great question: will the man
We get be bad or good? For
women, divorce is not
Respectable; to repel the man, not
possible.
Still more, a foreign woman,
coming among new laws,*

*New customs, needs the skill of
 magic, to find out
 What her home could not teach
 her, how to treat the man
 Whose bed she shares. And if in
 this exacting toil
 We are successful and our
 husband does not struggle
 Under the marriage yoke, our life
 is enviable.
 Otherwise, death is better. If a
 man grows tired
 Of the company at home, he can
 go out, and find
 A cure for tediousness. We wives
 are forced to look
 To one man only. And, they tell us,
 we at home
 Live free from danger, they go out
 to battle: fools!
 I'd rather stand three times in the
 front line than bear
 One child.
 But the same arguments do not
 apply
 To you and me ...*

This fascinating speech has been of great interest to people writing the history of women in ancient Greece. It appears to offer insights into the lives not only of citizen women but also of foreign women in a Greek city. The only drawback – as most of these writers admit – is that Greek tragedy is an entirely male discourse: written and performed by men for an audience comprised for the most part (we think) of men. If women had little or nothing to do with its performance, how authentic is the ‘woman’s voice’ heard here?

Perhaps it will help to consider this speech as persuasive rhetoric. As in later scenes, Medea is saying exactly what the chorus (a crowd of Corinthian wives) want to hear. She wants to get them on her side now, to win their confidence (and silence) before later revealing the truly shocking nature of her plans. Her tactic is to suggest that she and they are in the same boat: ‘we women’ ... ‘we wives’. Of course, they are not in the same boat at all. Medea is a foreign woman who was married to a Greek man (but not a Corinthian). This man has now left her so she has no status as a wife at all, still less a Greek wife. She acknowledges this difference in status at the end of the lines translated above; she also hints earlier in the speech at the difficulties facing foreign women in a Greek city. But her starting point is to describe the predicament of all women as essentially the same. To do so she shows an uncanny understanding (for a foreigner) of the life of a Greek wife, which must have sounded plausible to an ancient Greek ear in order for her speech to be persuasive. For this reason I think the social historian can admit Medea’s speech as evidence on the lives of Greek women.

Euripides’ *Medea* is therefore a valu-

able text to the ancient historian. If we are careful about how we read this text it will tell us a fair amount about life in the ancient Greek city-state. However, the play seems to tell us less about the city of Athens itself. Like most of the Greek tragedies that survive (there are some notable exceptions) *Medea* has nothing specific to say about Athenian democracy. The play is set long ago in Corinth and the only Athenian to appear (Aegeus) is a mythological king who can make decisions without putting them to vote in the assembly. One of the choral odes praises Athens, but not as a democracy. If we are to detect democratic resonances in the play we must look more broadly at its preoccupation with persuasive speech. For this play was originally performed in Athens, to an audience comprised mostly of Athenians. These Athenians were great connoisseurs, and critics, of rhetoric in many forms. They knew how to listen to a good speech in the assembly, the law courts, or indeed the theatre. The art of the public speech was important to politicians across the Greek world, but especially in democratic Athens, where persuasion meant power.

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